

LISTENING - A KEY LEADERSHIP SKILL

First, close your mouth; then open your heart

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How well do you listen? Listening is a key leadership skill identified in many leadership competency models, either explicitly, or embedded under the general domain of communication. *'Of all the time we spend in communication, by far the greatest is spent in listening.'*¹ It is only by listening that leaders: get feedback on how they are being perceived; learn how their team members are working; build positive team culture; engage with their team members; encourage new ideas and innovative thinking to be expressed; and so on.

Introduction

Because people are not generally taught how to listen, they are simply told to listen, for most it develops into an unconscious skill. You may direct your ears to listen to the words, but effective listening is about far more than just hearing the words that echo in your ears. Listening is an integral part of the whole communication cycle. Your listening habits come from many sources, starting from your childhood (what was the listening protocol in your home?), moving on to any training you received in school or in the workplace, wrapped up in your socialised attitudes and values developed through life experience. In addition, your natural strengths and deep-seated traits have an impact on how you listen now.

When you are taught to listen, you learn such things as:

- don't interrupt
- make eye contact
- put your attention on the speaker
- give feedback in the form of acknowledgement
- ask questions to encourage to speaker to continue
- ask questions to clarify understanding

But effective listening is far more than just the technical, observable actions described above. Read on to find out the benefits of effective listening, and how you can improve your listening.

The benefits of improved listening

Here are some of the amazing things that others have experienced by improving their listening skills:

- People are more open to new ideas
- 'I was astounded! All I had to do was listen, and this employee of mine worked through his own problem without me giving a bit of advice.'ⁱⁱ
- Fewer conflicts and less stress in the workplace
- Team members are more engaged and more willing to go the extra mile
- A customer who had been resistant to being audited finally agreed, and then thanked the auditor for the valuable input. It took an hour or so of 'listening' and rapport building in the initial phone call to gain a reluctant agreement to meet.'ⁱⁱⁱ
- Communication is successful more often, with less confusion and wasted time

You'll have your own reasons for wanting to improve your listening skills, with specific benefits you want to gain, and problems you want to leave behind. If you're a leader, or responsible for developing leaders in your organisation, read on, because there are some useful listening tools and techniques in this article.

Levels of listening

There is an emerging school of thought about listening being led by Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski and others; but before I describe that, let's take a look at the more traditional approach.

The traditional approach

In his publication, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey describes in Habit 5, Seek First to Understand, five levels of listening:

Level 1. Ignoring - not listening or hearing at all

Level 2. Pretending - look like listening, but the mind is elsewhere

- Level 3. Selective listening - hearing only certain parts of the conversation
- Level 4. Attentive listening - paying attention and focusing energy on the words being spoken
- Level 5. Empathic listening - listening with empathy and the intent to understand, to get inside the speaker's frame of reference and see the world as they see it.

As you move through the levels of listening, you'll generate different responses from the speaker. To get a feel for what this might mean, imagine yourself as the speaker - how do you feel and react when someone ignores you as you speak to them? And how is that different when the listener puts their whole attention on what you are saying?

The whole communication message is made up of: the words you use (7%); the tone and variation of your voice (38%); and all other non-verbal actions (55%). Similarly, listening is made up of far more than simply looking like you're listening.

In **levels two and three** it's most likely that the speaker will be aware of your pretence or selective listening. Just like you when you're the speaker, they'll have a sense or an intuition that your mind is elsewhere, even though you're apparently listening to what they are saying.

To move on to **level four** you need to consciously turn off your inner dialogue, clear your mind, and make way for the incoming message. This sounds simple, but is not necessarily easy.

I often coach people to use what I call the Teflon technique. You clear your mind, but then the next thing you know you've been distracted by another thought and lost focus on what the speaker is saying. That's when you turn your mind into Teflon, and you let the distracting thought slip right off again, bringing your focus and attention back to the speaker.

At **level five** you've mastered the skill of attending to the speaker and clearing your mind. You've moved on to listen with your ears and your heart for the unspoken, identifying the emotions underlying the speaker's message. Steven Covey^{iv} says, *'In empathic listening you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behaviour. You use your right brain as well as your left. You sense, you intuit, you feel.'* He also writes, **'You have to open yourself up to be influenced'**. At level five listening, that's possibly the most important concept to embrace.

Active listening and reflective listening

It's possible you can shift directly to level five listening. However, if you find that's not possible, there are a couple of techniques to learn at level four which enhance your practice at level five. They are active listening and reflective listening.

Before moving on to describe how to listen actively and reflectively, let's place this skill in context, because there are certain situations when their use is more important than others. For example:

- ✓ When a team member comes to you with a concern
- ✓ If there is a person you 'just can't get through to'
- ✓ When you are faced with someone in a tense emotional state
- ✓ When you are coaching a team member to improve performance
- ✓ In any relationship where there has been some sort of tension or upset
- ✓ When you sense a team member is lacking motivation
- ✓ Any time you want to improve how you are relating to another person

How to listen actively

As with all listening, it **starts when you close your mouth**. Apart from the rapport-building comments at the start of the conversation, your contribution is simply to listen and show the speaker you are listening. This means you, physically, do the following:

- Face the speaker^v
- Maintain comfortable eye contact
- Lean slightly forward towards the speaker (being mindful of their inter-personal comfort zone)
- Have a relaxed and open posture
- Make encouraging responses that indicate you're listening
- Do whatever else you can to build rapport with the person, apart from talking

When the speaker finishes talking, you can ask any clarifying questions, and then paraphrase what you understood them to have said. Use your own words to check that you understand what they've said. At the end of your paraphrase you could say, "That's what I thought you said - have I got it right, or is there something different?" Then wait. You will get a response of some sort from the speaker - either, 'yes', 'yes, but ...', or 'no.' Generally with 'yes, but...' and 'no' responses the speaker will go on to provide more information. You simply listen. Then, once again, paraphrase. Continue doing this until you get a firm 'yes'. Often you'll notice either a subtle or significant physiological

shift with the 'yes' and 'no' responses. I also see things like: head nodding, a relax back into their seat; a lean forward towards you sitting up stronger; and sometimes there is arm movement with all of these. Their body will tell you when you've got it right and when you need to start listening again.

In my experience in business, people often mistake getting the person to speak more with active listening. In active listening, your goal is to truly hear and understand what is concerning the speaker. So if you find yourself asking questions to 'lubricate' the conversation, or even adding bits of your own then you're **not** active listening - you're having a conversation. If you ask questions to check or clarify your understanding once the speaker has stopped talking, you **are** listening actively.

How to listen reflectively

Essentially this is the same as active listening, until you get to the paraphrasing stage. Then you, as much as possible, **use their words and phrases** to summarise what you've heard. This is more powerful, as words have their own individual meaning and emotion for each of us. And if you use your words, they may not ring true for the speaker.

Underlying both of these techniques is the openness of you, the listener, to be influenced. In addition they require your intention to be that of having the speaker feel they have been listened to. Especially when there is some level of emotional commitment or frustration in the situation, the speaker is not open to influence until they have released their pent up energy. This happens when they have their say, and they feel as if they've been heard accurately. Only then is it possible (no guarantees) to influence them in any way.

At Leader's Edge, we teach people how to build rapport consciously and how to identify and adapt to different communication styles, before moving on to teach active and reflective listening. We build these skills into most leadership coaching programmes, as we believe they are the foundation of building and developing influence.

Emerging levels of listening

Now, let's move on to the emerging school of thought coming from the Society for Organisational Learning (SOL), involving Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline and The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*), C Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski (*Synchronicity*) and Betty Sue Flowers. Their thinking is captured in their book, *Presence; exploring profound change in people, organizations and society*. The book's focus is on levels of learning. However, Scharmer has an aligned model that identifies four levels of listening. They are:

- Level 1. **Politeness** - this is the downloading state of listening, where people are 'talking nice' in conversations that are centred on themselves. He labels this the I-ego stage.
- Level 2. **Debate** - this is the seeing/hearing state of listening, where people 'talk tough' with conversations centred on issues. He labels this the I-it stage.
- Level 3. **Inquiry** - this is the sensing and inquiring state of listening, where people engage in reflective dialogue out of a deep sense of respect for each other. He labels this the I-thou stage.
- Level 4. **Flow** - this is the presencing state of listening, the place of generative dialogue, the place where new thinking and precepts emerge. He labels this the I-now stage.

Because this is an emerging model I'm not aware of any techniques or checklists that would help you move through the levels. However, you will probably gain a greater understanding if you read their book, *Presence*. I think here of the translated quote by Antoine de Saint Exupéry in *The Little Prince*: *'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; that which is essential is invisible to the eye'*.

Learn to listen to your heart

One recommendation to shift you up the levels of listening on this emerging model is, learn to listen to your own heart. Physiologically, the neural centre in your heart sends a signal to the emotional centre of your brain - it's your heart that triggers your emotional state, and your brain responds to that signal. By learning to listen to your heart and with your heart, you'll connect at the Inquiry and Flow levels of listening. Here are some simple steps to help you learn to listen to your heart:

- Pause
- Take a few deep breaths, relax, put your focus on your out (relaxing) breath

- As much as you are able, still and calm your mind
- Put your attention around your heart
- Imagine a place that is calm and peaceful for you
- If you have a question you are pondering, ask yourself the question then wait
- Remember to place your attention around your heart
- Then wait, an answer will come to you

Once you've learned to listen **to** your heart, then you can use the same technique to ready yourself to listen **with** your heart.

What if you don't improve?

- Relationships will probably continue the same way they've always been
- If you remain in your comfort zone, with the same listening habits, you'll find it difficult to grow
- You may lose the best people from your team
- You may lose the best ideas from your organisation
- There'll be more wasted energy and loss of enthusiasm
- Stress and conflict will still be created through miscommunication and misunderstanding
- Other teams and organisations may gain on you
- You may miss one of the simplest ways of reducing your stress and increasing your personal satisfaction

Summary

- Listening is a key leadership skill
- The first step of listening is 'close your mouth'
- By and large people are not taught to listen - it's an unconscious skill
- There are levels of listening - traditional and emerging
- Two techniques to improve your listening are active listening and reflective listening
- To listen empathically you must listen with your heart
- There are many benefits, both personally and professionally, to improving your listening skills
- There are many costs and stresses associated with poor listening, and if you don't improve they will continue to create problems for you

And remember, listening is the skill you can practice constantly, and no one even knows you're practicing!

Resources

Leader's Edge Ltd

We can work with you individually, or with your organisation to assess the level of competence of listening, for individuals, teams or the whole organisation. We prefer to work with clients who are willing to link competencies to business results, as a way of measuring the effectiveness of the work we do. However, if you're not there yet, we can still help. We have a range resources, including NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) that means any solutions can be simply tailored to your needs. We run courses, do one-on-one coaching at all levels in organisations, as well as train your people to develop and deliver skills workshops.

If you'd rather do it yourself, here are some of the resources we recommend:

Self Assessments for Listening Skills

If you're in to self-assessments, key in 'listening self-assessments' to your Google search engine, then scroll through the items to find free tests. At the time of writing this article the first one I came across is at

<http://leo.oise.utoronto.ca/~kscott/website%20readings/Listening%20Awareness%20Self.pdf>

Here's another one: <http://www.pindling.org/Math/MathHelp/Listening/> - this is based on the Burley-Allen evaluation mentioned below.

Complete one of these to find out what good and bad listening habits you've developed so far, or alternatively get hold of the book, *Listening - The Forgotten Skill - a self-teaching guide*, by Madelyn Burley-Allen. It has an excellent Effective Communication Self-Evaluation as well as some very useful exercises to promote self-insight around listening.

Books:

- Listening: The Forgotten Skill - Madelyn Burley-Allen
- The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook - Senge et al - particularly Chapter 33 - Mental Models
- Presence: Exploring profound change in people, organizations and society - Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers
- The Power of Full Engagement - Jim Loehr & Tony Schwarz
- Messages: The Communications Skills Book - McKay, Davis & Fanning
- The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People - Steven R Covey
- Principle Centered Leadership - Steven R Covey

Websites:

- Otto Scharmer: <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/>
- Society for Organizational Learning: <http://www.solonline.org/>

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We facilitate personal change in the business environment through:

- ☆ Leadership development
- ☆ Team effectiveness
- ☆ Individual and team corporate coaching
- ☆ Thought partnership and collaboration

Endnotes:

ⁱ Listening: The Forgotten Skill - Madelyn Burley-Allen

ⁱⁱ Listening: The Forgotten Skill - Madelyn Burley-Allen

ⁱⁱⁱ An recent example from a client of Leader's Edge Coaching Programme

^{iv} The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Habit 5

^v In NLP terms, facing the speaker and making eye contact may not be the best way to build rapport. For more information on building rapport using NLP methods, contact Leader's Edge or consult an NLP Practitioner.